

The Caspian Disputes: Nationalism and Nomadism in Early Soviet Central Asia

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At the dawn of the Soviet era, nomadic migrations around the Caspian Sea were bookended by conflict.¹ As they reached their northernmost pastures west of the Ural River, each year nomads were finding larger Russian settlements where open pasture had been. When they headed south, onto the Ustyurt Plateau which sits between the Caspian Sea and what was once the Aral Sea, they encountered competition of a different kind. The Mangışlak Peninsula had long been a theater for hostilities between nomadic tribes, who would soon be formally divided into either the Turkmen or Kazakh nations.² Further still across the Ustyurt Plateau, the shallow Garabogazköl Lagoon was at the heart of a landscape whose resources were contested.

No single factor explains the conflict along either strip of the Caspian shoreline, and in both cases strife long predated the coming of the Bolsheviks. The northern Kazakh Steppe was colonized by Tsarist forces earlier and, therefore, for longer than much of the area that became Soviet Central Asia.³ The first period of conquest was led by Cossack “peasant-soldiers” who fortified the region before a second larger influx of Russian colonizers commenced in the late nineteenth century.⁴ Movement south to Central Asia was particularly intense after the Stolypin reforms from 1906.⁵ Assisted by the Tsarist Resettlement Administration, incomers settled the nomads’ most fertile pastures and

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¹As the key variable here is habitual migration, and in the interests of intelligibility, “nomad” and “nomadic” will be used throughout this article to describe a broad range of agricultural practices, all involving one or more annual migrations.

²Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2006), 60.

³Kazakhs also suffered a series of crushing defeats against the Oirats in the early eighteenth century. See Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington, 2002), 150.

⁴Niccolò Pianciola and Susan Finnel, “Famine in the Steppe. The Collectivization of Agriculture and the Kazak Herdsmen, 1928–1934,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 45 (2004): 138.

⁵Gulnar Kendirbay, “The National Liberation Movement of the Kazakh Intelligentsia at the beginning of the 20th Century,” *Central Asian Survey* 16:4 (1997): 488.

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obstructed migratory routes, creating competition for remaining land.⁶ Imperialism intensified hardships which in turn intensified local tensions.⁷ Kazakh society became more stratified and more integrated with settled communities, with many nomads themselves settling.⁸ Increasing pressures precipitated the uprisings of 1916 across Central Asia.⁹ Then the ravages of the Russian Civil War were followed by a crippling famine among Kazakhs and others from 1917 to 1920, further diminishing the number of livestock among nomads.¹⁰

Appointing itself the inheritor of this unenviable legacy, Soviet power set about defining and then trying to resolve the problems that beset its nomadic subjects. Circumstances were not auspicious. Before 1917, St. Petersburg's administrative infrastructure and the application of the tsar's authority had been very uneven in Central Asia.¹¹ Governance in the early 1920s was also a piecemeal affair, and anxieties about the Communist party's lack of influence and control in the region lingered long into the decade.¹² Bolshevik statecraft was ever ambitious, however, and the party's power to veto and compel did gradually increase. Initial cooperation with local elites had mixed results. Many took power but made little contribution to Soviet statecraft. Others at least shared the Bolsheviks' most basic developmental aims.¹³ Thus even in the earliest years, when the impact of the party's decisions could be unintentional or made indirectly through external actors, impact there sometimes was.¹⁴ While early state and party sources offer only a glance at everyday nomadic

⁶Peter Rottier, "The Kazakness of Sedentarization: Promoting Progress as Tradition in Response to the Land Question," *Central Asian Survey* 22:1 (2003): 68–69; Steven Sabol, "Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization: The "Touch of Civilization" on the Sioux and Kazakhs," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43:1 (2012): 44.

⁷Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan and Beyond* (Seattle, 2004), 35; Mukash Omarov, *Rasstreliaia step': Istoriia Adaevskogo vosstaniia 1931 goda* (Almaty, 1991), 9.

⁸M. Kh. Asylbekov et al., ed., *Istoriia Kazakhstana: S drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei*, vol. 3, *Kazakhstan v novoe vremia* (Almaty, 2010), 571, 596.

⁹Robert Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden: Herrschaft und Hunger in Kasachstan* (Hamburg, 2014), 66; Alexander Morrison, "'Sowing the Seeds of National Strife in this Alien Region': The Pahlen Report and *Pereselenie* in Turkestan, 1908–1910," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 31 (2012): 9, 27; Martha B. Olcott, "The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918–24," *Soviet Studies* 33 3 (1981): 352–69; Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865–1923* (Bloomington, 2010).

¹⁰Steven Sabol, "The Creation of Soviet Central Asia: The 1924 National Delimitation," *Central Asian Survey* 14 (1995): 237; Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden*, 78; Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs* (Stanford, 1987), 159; Nurbulat E. Masanov et al., ed., *Istoriia Kazakhstana: Narody i kul'tury* (Almaty, 2001), 367–70; Marco Buttino, *La Rivoluzione Capovolta: L'Asia centrale tra il crollo dell'impero Zarista e la formazione dell'URSS* (Naples, 2003).

¹¹Bhavna Davé, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* (London, 2007), 36.

¹²See, for example, complaints about the poor functioning of Land Commissions in the Kazakh republic, 1926–27, in Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstana (TsGARK), f. 280, op. 4, d. 18, l. 1. Niccolò Pianciola calls the northern regions of Kazakhstan in the early 1920s a "peculiar frontier society" in his "The Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931–1933," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 24 (Fall 2001): 238. See also Bokatoz Kassymbekova and Christian Teichmann, "The Red Man's Burden: Soviet European Officials in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization*, ed. Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (Bristol, 2013): 163–86.

¹³Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (London, 1999), 125–31.

¹⁴Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001), 60; Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 88–89; Alun Thomas, "Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State, 1919–1934" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 2015), 5–6.



life, they do give credible account of the consequences of earlier actions taken in nomadic regions, such as the policies affecting the Caspian shoreline and its nomadic inhabitants.

The development and imposition of these policies—the topic of this article—are a case study in the interaction between two phenomena: first, the Soviet state's treatment of its nomadic communities, and, second, the Soviet state's treatment of its national minorities (the “National Question”).¹⁵ This article will argue that nomadism might have been better managed in the years following the Civil War had the National Question not overshadowed and misrepresented nomadic interests.

The Bolsheviks' nationalities policies have received much scholarly attention. Studies by Francine Hirsch, Terry Martin, Yuri Slezkine, and Jeremy Smith analyze, in their various ways, the actions of a Communist party seeking to create national republics and semi-autonomous territories in the former Russian Empire and the various methods employed to do so.¹⁶ A compendium of knowledge was generated and organized by state agents over a long period of time to render visible all the national minorities believed to reside in the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Peoples who might have identified themselves otherwise were formally made members of various nationalities and would be given national histories and national artistic traditions as well as national territories.¹⁸ Within republics the party pursued a policy of “nativization” (*korenizatsiia*), an evolving agenda which sought to place members of a particular nationality into positions of authority.¹⁹ In rural areas of Kazakhstan, as elsewhere, preferential treatment for the titular nationality could be used to validate decolonization, that is, the forced expulsion of Russian settlers from colonized land.²⁰ All this was partly justified on the basis that fostering non-Russian national identity would facilitate economic development and thereby “defeat non-Russian backwardness.”²¹ Nationality was thought of as “modern (postfeudal)” and was contrasted with feudal social norms and structures to be found among nomads.²²

The creation of national autonomous regions was also a means of reinforcing Bolshevik power where it was weakest.²³ It symbolized the partial endorsement of a nationalist agenda

¹⁵The term was used in Joseph Stalin's notorious “Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros” (1913), in *Stalin I. V.: Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1946), 290–367. See also Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 18–19.

¹⁶Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*; Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1994): 414–52; Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge, England, 2013).

¹⁷Francine Hirsch, “The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category of Nationality in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses,” *Slavic Review* 56 (Summer 1997): 251–78.

¹⁸For examples from the Kazakh case see Smith, *Red Nations*, 15, 93–94.

¹⁹Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 140; Romeo A. Cherot, “Nativization of Government and Party Structure in Kazakhstan, 1920–1930,” *American Slavic and East European Review* 14:1 (1955): 42–58.

²⁰Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 60–61.

²¹Slezkine, “USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 423.

²²Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 164. On nomadism as an aspect of feudalism see Charles J. Halperin, “Soviet Historiography on Russia and the Mongols,” *Russian Review* 41 (July 1982): 306–22. This perception of nomadism lingered in the later Soviet historiography (G. Dakhshleiger, “Kazakhstan nakanune NEPa,” *Voprosy istorii*, 1966, no. 8:27).

²³Ronald Grigor Suny, “‘Don't Paint Nationalism Red!’ National Revolution and Socialist Anti-Imperialism,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (London, 2004), 193.



which many regional elites had pursued earnestly for some time.²⁴ These regional elites spoke the language of national liberation and, as the Red Army's supremacy became clear, lobbied for some form of autonomy within an emerging Soviet polity.²⁵ In the Kazakh case the most prominent example is Alash, a group of Kazakh intellectuals who made themselves the government of a new autonomous territory, the Alash Orda, in December 1917.²⁶ Although the territory was dissolved in 1920, some of its leaders, such as Sultanbek Khojanov, were integrated into the early Soviet administration and strove to influence the creation of national territories, successfully or fruitlessly.²⁷

Operating inside the Communist party, recruits from Alash and other movements fought to defend and extend the jurisdictions of their new national Soviet republics. Sometimes this led them to challenge the agenda of central organs in Moscow, as in early arguments over the status of Orenburg as capital of the Kazakh republic.²⁸ At others times, disputes emerged between Central Asian territories. The land in and around Tashkent, bearing an ethnically diverse population, was forcefully contested by Kazakh and Uzbek officials at different points in the 1920s. Other land along the Kazakh-Uzbek border came under contention too. In trying to settle disagreements between Kazakh and Uzbek officials, Soviet authorities carefully reviewed the economic, ethnic, and administrative implications of each borderline.²⁹

The early border-making process in the northwest of the Kazakh Republic, and its effect on local peoples, had its own specificities which form the bulk of this article's content. But as with disputes over borders elsewhere, attempts at resolving conflict along the Caspian shoreline entailed a certain way of understanding the people of the region.³⁰ The Bolsheviks' actions were the product of an assumption that people could be divided into different national groups. The typology of nationhood employed by the Communist party squeezed out alternative systems of categorization, with mixed results.

If the treatment of national minorities has been examined in some detail, the treatment of nomads, an agricultural minority in the early Soviet period, has been investigated less

²⁴Adeeb Khalid, "Nationalizing the Revolution in Central Asia: The Transformation of Jadidism, 1917–1920," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford, 2001), 145–59.

²⁵Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 71; Sergey Abashin et al., "Soviet Rule and the Delineation of Borders in the Ferghana Valley, 1917–1930," in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (London, 2011), 94–118; Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge, England, 2000), 222–23.

²⁶Sabol, "Creation of Soviet Central Asia," 225; Smith, *Red Nations*, 83; Uyama Tomohiko, "The Geography of Civilizations: A Spatial Analysis of the Kazakh Intelligentsia's Activities, from the mid-Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century," *Sapporo Summer Symposium* (1998): 85.

²⁷Abikey Arman Muratuly and Tursun Hazretaly, "S. Khojanov and the Phenomenon of National Communism in Central Asia and Kazakhstan in the 20-Ies. XX Century," *Asian Social Science* 10 (2014): 93–101; Soucek, *History of Inner Asia*, 215–16. In the long term, many of those nationalists who did find their way into the party's embrace would eventually be exiled or executed (Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 229). For as long as they served, however, these figures became the building blocks of the nascent Soviet power structure in Central Asia.

²⁸Stephen Blank, "Ethnic and Party Politics in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1920–1924," *Central Asian Survey* 10:3 (1991): 5–6.

²⁹Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 165–73.

³⁰Scholars diverge, for example, on the theoretical position taken by Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin on the existence of nations and the extent of the two men's disagreement (Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 14; Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 15–19).



extensively.³¹ Much analysis has focused on the Kazakh Republic, which contained a large number of Central Asian nomads and encompassed much of the territory under discussion in this article, and on collectivization.³²

Collectivization had a particularly profound impact on the Kazakh Steppe. Writing on the famine which followed Stalin's collectivization drive, Niccolò Pianciola states that "the earliest and most disastrous was the experience of Kazakhstan."³³ Politics in the Kazakh republic had shifted after Filipp Goloshchekin was made first secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party and he instituted his "Little October" in 1926.³⁴ On the notional basis that the 1917 October Revolution had bypassed the Kazakh countryside, Goloshchekin intensified political repression and began collectivization in Kazakhstan earlier, and at a greater pace, than elsewhere in the USSR. The results of his ambition were earlier and greater adversity.³⁵ The campaign precipitated a dramatic decline in the numbers of livestock among Kazakh communities, vastly greater than the Union average, and leading to further famine in a region still recovering from the shortages of the early 1920s.³⁶

The collectivization of the Kazakhs came to be attended by sedentarization.³⁷ The transition, coerced or voluntary, of Kazakh nomads to sedentary agriculture had been

³¹Certainly the treatment of nomadic peoples and nomadic customs in the Tsarist era has been the subject of a diverse range of studies. See Virginia Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Richmond, 2001); Allen J. Frank, "Islam and Ethnic Relations in the Kazakh Inner Horde: Muslim Cossacks, Tatar Merchants, and Kazakh Nomads in Turkic Manuscripts, 1870–1910," in *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Anke von Kügelen et al. (Berlin, 1998); Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1880–1910* (Boston, 2001); Robert P. Geraci, "Going Abroad or Going to Russia? Orthodox Missionaries in the Kazakh Steppe, 1881–1917," in *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia*, ed. M. K. Robert and Robert P. Geraci (Ithaca, 2001): 274–310; Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); and George J. Demko, *The Russian Colonization of Kazakhstan, 1896–1916* (Bloomington, 1969). For an example of Soviet-era scholarship on the topic see S. E. Tolybekov, *Kochevoe obshchestvo Kazakhov v XVII–nachale XX veka: Politiko-ekonomicheskii analiz* (Alma-Ata, 1971). Broader works which touch on nomadism in Tsarist and Soviet contexts include Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath, *The End of Nomadism? Society, State and the Environment in Inner Asia* (Durham, 1999); Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World* (Cambridge, England, 1984); and Wolfgang Weisleder, ed., *The Nomadic Alternative: Modes and Models of Interaction in the African-Asian Deserts and Steppes* (Paris, 1978).

³²The Kazakh Republic's first formal title was the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR), changed when the borders of the territory were redrawn in 1925 to the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR). Kazakhs and their republic were referred to as *Kirghiz* until 1925 by state and party operatives, but in the interests of intelligibility *Kirghiz* has been translated into "Kazakh" throughout this article. The "autonomous" qualification would again be dropped from the name of the republic in 1936. See Didar Kassymova et al., eds., *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan* (Lanham, 2012), 145, 158–59.

³³Pianciola, "Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan," 237.

³⁴Sarah Cameron, "The Hungry Steppe: Soviet Kazakhstan and the Kazakh Famine, 1921–1934" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2011), 51–53.

³⁵K. S. Aldazhumanov et al., eds., *Istoriia Kazakhstana: S drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei*, vol. 4 (Almaty, 2010), 260–62; L. D. Kuderina, *Genotsid v Kazakhstane* (Moscow, 1994); Kokish Ryspaev, *Istoriia Respubliki Kazakhstan* (Almaty, 2008), 250–51.

³⁶Pianciola, "Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan," 242; M. K. Kozybaev et al., *Kollektivizatsiia v Kazakhstane: Tragediia krest'iansva* (Alma-Ata, 1992), 20.

³⁷Sedentarization was also imposed upon the Kyrgyz, Karakalpaks, Kalmyks, Buryats and "the smaller nationalities of the Far North." See Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society* (Oxford, 1991), 107.



endorsed by local and imperial elites since before the Russian Revolution, but in the late 1920s sedentarization became the settlement of nomads by violent force.³⁸ It began on a localized scale as early as 1928 but became a widespread phenomenon from 1932.³⁹ As the chaos and turmoil of collectivization intensified, militia in the employ of the party began forcing famine refugees to settle in delineated areas, grossly exacerbating acute hardship.⁴⁰ The demographic impact of collectivization, sedentarization, and famine was catastrophic. Figures vary, but overall Soviet Kazakh fatalities reached perhaps 1.5 million between 1928 and 1934, when collectivization was largely finalized.⁴¹

Scholarship on the USSR's nomads often looks toward the tragedies of the early 1930s, and searches in the 1920s either for harbingers of the oncoming period of mass violence or for points of contrast with those events.⁴² The 1920s have also been examined for further insights beyond explication of collectivization.⁴³ Zh. B. Abylkhozhin, for example, was among the first to question Soviet assumptions about the inherent instability of the nomadic economy in that period. Matthew Payne reveals how nomadic identities were replaced by new class-based economic identities with the coming of industry. Recurrent themes for Sarah Cameron include the limited power of the party and the extreme difficulty of governing a mobile population, interrupted by occasional moments of success. Robert Kindler notes escalating tensions between nomadic Kazakhs and newly arrived European peasants and discusses the administration's distrust of nomadic and tribal culture. Paula A. Michaels demonstrates how the Bolsheviks' understanding of non-Russian peoples informed their treatment of non-Russian social norms which sat awkwardly alongside the regime's overall developmental aims.⁴⁴ In all cases Kazakh national identity and its associations—in the Bolshevik worldview—with backwardness are crucial variables.⁴⁵

³⁸Rottier, "Kazakness of Sedentarization," 68, 70.

³⁹Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden*, 109–11; Zere Maidanali, *Zemledel'cheskie raiony Kazakhstana v gody nasil'stvennoi kollektivizatsii* (Almaty, 2003), 3–5.

⁴⁰Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 25, d. 339, l. 92; Kozybaev et al., *Kollektivizatsiia v Kazakhstane*, 16; Cameron, "Hungry Steppe."

⁴¹Pianciola and Finnel, "Famine in the Steppe," 137; Kozybaev et al., *Kollektivizatsiia v Kazakhstane*, 27; Martha Brill Olcott, "The Collectivization Drive in Kazakhstan," *Russian Review* 40 (April 1981): 122. See also Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine* (London, 1986), 189–98; Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden*; Mark Tolts, "Ethnic Composition of Kazakhstan on the Eve of the Second World War: Re-evaluation of the 1939 Soviet Census Results," *Central Asian Survey* 25 (March–June 2006): 144; and Smith, *Red Nations*, 106. The impact was most acute in eastern regions of Kazakhstan (Masanov et al., *Istoriia Kazakhstana*, 376).

⁴²Matthew J. Payne, "Seeing Like a Soviet State: Settlement of Nomadic Kazakhs, 1928–1934," in *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography*, ed. Golfo Alexopoulos et al. (Basingstoke, 2011), 61. On the nomadic peoples of the Soviet far north see Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North* (London, 1994).

⁴³Relevant general reference works include Kokish Ryspaev, *Istoriia Respubliki Kazakhstan*; Nurbulat E. Masanov et al., ed., *Istoriia Kazakhstana: Narody i kul'tury*; and Aldazhumanov et al., *Istoriia Kazakhstana*.

⁴⁴Zh. B. Abylkhozhin, *Traditsionnaia struktura Kazakhstana: Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie aspekty funktsionirovaniia i transformatsii (1920–1930-e gg.)* (Alma-Ata, 1991), 49–51; Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, 2001), 7–8; Cameron, "The Hungry Steppe," 25–74; Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden*, 47–48, 61–65, 86–89; A. Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin's Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, 2003).

⁴⁵Isabelle Ohayon, *La sédentarisation des Kazakhs dans l'URSS de Staline: Collectivisation et changement social (1928–1945)* (Paris, 2006).



The National Question, then, is seldom far from studies of nomadism in early Soviet Central Asia. In the case of northwestern Kazakhstan, what is most important is that early nationalities policies engendered two types of boundary, one nominally physical, one subtler and more abstract. Both shaped nomads' experience of Soviet power.

First, the jurisdictions of each new national territory had to be bounded, and so new geographical boundaries had to be drawn. Where convenient topographical features were lacking, the old Tsarist borders could respond to local differences of religion and lifestyle, as perceived by the state, and could be designed to control nomadic migration.⁴⁶ But the Bolsheviks made greater effort to reflect the predominant languages and cultures of different areas in spite of the fact that "diverse peoples lived interspersed; many had at one time been nomadic, and some still were." This leads Hirsch to state that the delimitation of the region into republics in the 1920s "changed the political and social terrain of Central Asia," and nomadism was part of this changing terrain.⁴⁷ The creation of national borders sometimes exacerbated conflicts such as those around the shore of the Caspian Sea.

The second way in which nationality and nationalism contextualize the earliest treatment of nomads is in their system of categorization. As already stated, the Soviet state's approach was derived from a social typology in which peoples could be divided into different national groups. Acceptance of this typology necessitated certain interpretative assumptions for administrators operating around the Caspian and elsewhere. The Bolsheviks' early recognition of the differences between, for example, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz rendered obsolete their Tsarist predecessors' governor-generalship of Turkestan, one territory in which they could all at one time be found.⁴⁸ As new national territories were carved out of old imperial structures, conflict over resources and jurisdictions proliferated, and these were understood by administrators as disagreements between nationalities.⁴⁹ When these conflicts involved nomadic communities, the habits of nomads could be raised as a matter of national importance.

Indeed, nationality and nomadism did not only interact in Soviet policy outcomes. The governing attitude toward one informed the governing attitude toward the other. In the view of the prerevolutionary Kazakh intelligentsia, nomadism was an obstacle to the realization of Kazakh nationhood, so their hopes for national autonomy necessitated mass settlement.⁵⁰ The Bolshevik administration went on to sort the nationalities they identified into a hierarchy of development, with Russians among those groups exhibiting the most progress and many Central Asian groups manifesting the most "backwardness."⁵¹ Nomadism

⁴⁶Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 47; Sergei Abashin, "Les Sartes, une peuple d'avenir": l'éthnographie et l'Empire au Turkestan russe," in *Le Turkestan russe: une colonie comme les autres?* ed. Svetlana Gorshenina and Sergei Abashin (Paris, 2009): 353–79; Kendirbay, "National Liberation Movement of the Kazakh Intelligentsia," 488.

⁴⁷Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 165. It is worth adding that, while emphasizing the top-down nature of the delimitation, Svat Soucek does credit the Bolsheviks with "fairly competent work" (*History of Inner Asia*, 225).

⁴⁸Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 78.

⁴⁹Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 55–56.

⁵⁰Rottier, "Kazakness of Sedentarization," 67; Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics*, 35.

⁵¹Matthew J. Payne, "Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1929) and Soviet Orientalism," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21:1 (2001): 40; Kassymbekova and Teichmann, "Red Man's Burden," 164. On the Kazakh intelligentsia's perception of Kazakhs as pre-modern see Rottier, "Kazakness of Sedentarization," 67.



was the quintessential marker of backwardness.⁵² It was believed that nomadism locked its practitioners out of essential features of socialism, whereas national identity could facilitate development and liberation from primitive nomadic norms.⁵³ Early suggestions that the Kazakhs, as a nation, were inherently nomadic were quickly dismissed, but the prevalence of nomadism among Kazakhs was beyond dispute.⁵⁴ The Bolsheviks' stated aim to identify nationalities like the Kazakhs and raise their developmental level would therefore throw nomadism into sharp relief, helping to justify sedentarization, among other policies.

That the Bolsheviks equated nomadism with backwardness need not be doubted, yet such an equation did not automatically lead to persecution.⁵⁵ Nomads were not always subject to onerous legislation intended to immediately expedite their transition to a sedentary lifestyle. This was especially so in the early years. At times, party members acted to stabilize the nomadic economy and alleviate nomadic suffering without recourse to settlement.⁵⁶ They did so, for example, by recognizing nomads as a discrete group in taxation policy in May 1921 and taxing them less than their sedentary counterparts.⁵⁷ The appropriate taxation of nomads would cause intense argument between state commissariats later in the decade.⁵⁸

To be sure, some such actions reveal an administration which had to compromise with its "organizational helplessness" and the difficulties of governing itinerant populations.⁵⁹ But this cannot be proven in all cases. It is also true that some privileges bestowed on nomads were part of a broader package of benefits extended to Kazakhs, as non-Russians, in the context of decolonization and *korenizatsiia*; further examples of nationalities policies informing economic decisions.⁶⁰ But, as in the tax example, nomads specifically could be targeted by concessions which did not apply to their sedentary compatriots in spite of the fact that they shared a national identity.

Many of those involved in the governance of Central Asia just after the Civil War were those new Communist party members who had transitioned from nationalist intelligentsias or movements like Alash. Though these figures shared the party's broader scepticism about

⁵²Michaels, *Curative Powers*, 153. For some Tsarist-era context on this view see Seymour Becker, "Russia between East and West: The Intelligentsia, Russian National Identity and the Asian Borderlands," *Central Asian Survey* 10:4 (1991): 50.

⁵³A. N. Donich, *Problema novogo Kazakhskogo ayla* (Kzyl-Orda, 1928), 3; Arkhiv Prezidenta Respublika Kazakhstan (APRK), f. 139, op. 1, d. 40, l. 12; Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 4–9.

⁵⁴Thomas, "Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State," 36, 64.

⁵⁵The equation itself had nuances. Early Soviet scholarship, drawing on late Tsarist Orientalism and in some cases employing its practitioners, occasionally signalled some limited respect for the nomadic lifestyle. See Michael R. Rouland, "Music and the Making of the Kazak Nation" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2005), 274–75; Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford, 2011), 144–45; and idem, "Orientalism, Nationalism, and Ethnic Diversity in Late Imperial Russia," *Historical Journal* 48:1 (2005): 145. In Hirsch's rendering, the ethnographic and anthropological work required to delimit the former Russian Empire into nations necessitated the construction of a "revolutionary alliance" between the Bolsheviks and a wide range of imperial scholars (*Empire of Nations*, 21).

⁵⁶Payne, "Seeing Like a Soviet State," 61.

⁵⁷Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 1318, op. 11, d. 26, ll. 11–11ob.

⁵⁸Thomas, "Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State," 149–50.

⁵⁹RGASPI, f. 17, op. 25, d. 159, l. 25.

⁶⁰Pianciola and Finnel, "Famine in the Steppe," 145.



the viability of nomadism and wished to see its discontinuation, they did not all agree that nomadism had to be instantly snuffed out as rapidly as possible as and when any opportunity arose. Not all long-standing party members thought this, either.⁶¹ Whatever the ultimate aims of the party and the local elites whom it absorbed, some of their policies sought to shore up nomadism in the short term.

In light of this, the maladministration of nomads by regional state actors need not only be explained by a relentless animosity toward nomadism as a lifestyle, reinforced by a hierarchical typology of nationhood and progress. Sometimes nationalities policies did not justify belligerence toward nomads but simply distracted local elites from the nomads' needs, needs which they may otherwise have accommodated. This trend was manifested in border-making around the Caspian Sea. When the emerging state's national and economic priorities represented "two opposing principles concerning ... boundaries," and said economic priorities were not assuredly, immediately hostile to nomadic interests, the national principle could nevertheless distort policies to the nomads' disadvantage.⁶² In fact, the typology of nationality could prove so compelling, and would perhaps require so much intellectual exertion, as to relegate the nomadic-sedentary divide to an auxiliary concern even when its import was very considerable.

Rather than local nomadic conflicts confounding the neat delineation of nations, the ongoing delineation of nations complicated the resolution of nomadic conflicts. Examples of the party's efforts to resolve such conflicts are hereafter divided into two geographical regions, the first to the north beside and beyond the Ural River, the second to the south around the Garabogazköl Lagoon. In both cases, the National Question affected the state's approach and effect.

BEYOND THE URAL RIVER

On October 3, 1921, the People's Commissariat for Agriculture (Narkomzem RSFSR), based in Moscow, turned its attention to two pending territorial disputes between the Kazakh Bukey province and the predominantly Russian city of Astrakhan.⁶³ The first dispute concerned 10,677 desiatinas of land connected to Lake Baskunchak, a landlocked body of salt water around 160 miles north of the Caspian Sea and not far east of the Volga. The second related to the 50,977 desiatinas encompassed by the "Regular Nomadic Encampment" (Ocherednoe Kochev'e).⁶⁴ This "encampment" was in fact a swathe of land once claimed by Kazakhs but increasingly leased to Russian farmers. It sat between Lake Baskunchak and the Volga River.⁶⁵ The Astrakhan and Bukey provinces each professed an interest in

⁶¹Thomas, "Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State," 44–46.

⁶²Sabol, "Creation of Soviet Central Asia," 233.

⁶³GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 84. A province (*guberniia*) was one of the largest administrative subdivisions of the late Russian Empire, also used by the Soviet state until the mid-1920s. Bukey Province was the successor to the Inner or Bukey *Juz* (Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions*).

⁶⁴GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 84. Original documents from the dispute use the rounded figures of 10,000 and 50,000 desiatinas to describe the scale of the Baskunchak tract and the Ocherednoe Kochev'e, respectively. The more specific sizes given above can be found in GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 30, l. 1.

⁶⁵References in the secondary literature to the Ocherednoe Kochev'e are sparse. Clear information on its geographical location can be found in a report from the Astrakhan Provincial Agricultural Department dated



these two regions, which straddled a border between administrative jurisdictions, between national territories, and between agricultural practices.

Both of these pockets of land were located between the Volga River to the west and the Ural River to the east, in a region where historical claims of ownership were complicated. In the late eighteenth century Kazakhs had been forbidden from crossing the Ural River from the east and using nearby pasture because this had led to clashes with nearby Cossacks.⁶⁶ Then, in 1801, Tsarist authorities gave a collection of Kazakh families permission to emigrate across the Ural River and establish a new khanate named after their leader, Sultan Bukey.⁶⁷ The subsequent creation of a nominally autonomous Bukey Khanate, sometimes called the Inner *Juz* (Horde), was also done with the tsar's sanction.⁶⁸

The fortunes of the khanate fluctuated over time, as did its relations with local Russians. First rumours of forced conversion to Orthodox Christianity, then bad winter weather, had encouraged some members of the Bukey Khanate to again cross the Ural River, west to east, and return to their former *Juz*, only to be repeatedly driven back by Russian forces. As it would again later in the early 1920s, the Russian habit of leasing land to nomads led to mutual accusations of exploitation and ethnic conflict.⁶⁹ Imperial soldiers eventually intervened to prevent an uprising within the khanate.⁷⁰ On the death of Bukey's successor, Khan Jangir, in 1845, the khanate was officially abolished, though the Kazakhs remained.⁷¹ Their land came under the jurisdiction of the nearby city of Astrakhan and they became nominally part of Astrakhan Province. New systems of imperial administration were introduced.⁷² In spite of this, importantly, the resident Kazakhs' agricultural customs persisted and therefore remained predominantly nomadic.⁷³

The pre-Soviet story of the Bukey region, thinly told, provides background for later disputes in the early 1920s but also exemplifies an important aspect of the tsar's approach to border-making in Central Asia. Colonial officials, Alexander Morrison and Svetlana Gorshenina have argued, often operated on the assumption that certain topographical features placed geographical limits on the expansion and consolidation of imperial power.⁷⁴ The Ural River was first used to divide Cossacks from Kazakhs; then, after 1801, it was used to

October 20, 1921 (GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 31, ll. 6–60b.), which indicates some small confusion over the ethnic composition of the nomads in the camp. The Astrakhan Provincial Congress of Soviets referred to Kalmyk as well as Kazakh land in relation to the disagreement in 1922 (*ibid.*, d. 30, l. 1). Since the Soviet authorities ultimately treated the camp as *Kirghiz* (Kazakh) this article treats the Ocherednoe Kochev'e case as representative of the treatment of Kazakh nomads generally.

⁶⁶Kassymova et al., *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan*, 54–55.

⁶⁷Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 182.

⁶⁸A *Juz* was a confederation of Kazakh tribes.

⁶⁹Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, 200; Olcott, *Kazakhs*, 63.

⁷⁰Olcott, *Kazakhs*, 64.

⁷¹In Soucek's summary of these events, the "elimination" of Bukey's polity in 1845 was an act of deliberate suppression by St. Petersburg (*History of Inner Asia*, 197).

⁷²Frank, "Islam and Ethnic Relations," 218; Olcott, *Kazakhs*, 61–62. The particular transliteration of Kazakh names also comes from Olcott.

⁷³Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions*, 91.

⁷⁴See Alexander Morrison, "Russia, Khoqand, and the Search for a 'Natural' Frontier, 1893–1865," and Svetlana Gorshenina, "A Theory of 'Natural Boundaries' and the Conquest of Kuldja (1870–1871): A Self-portrait of Russian Military and Diplomatic Elites in St. Petersburg and Turkestan," both in *Ab Imperio* 2 (2014): 1–27, and 102–65, respectively.



divide two groups of nomads, one more assimilated into the empire than the other. The river, therefore, was an important administrative symbol, used to define the terms of St. Petersburg's control.

Following the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the river's political significance ran dry and a dual process had begun. Ostensible political power was not divided between the governors of geographically distinct areas, but between national territories. The predominance of Kazakhs west of the Ural River was more important than the practicalities of the landscape. Thus the inclusion of a Bukey Province into the new Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920 recognized and represented the Kazakh population living in the former territory of the Bukey Khanate. The administrative center of the province was moved from Astrakhan to Urda, a small town now in far western Kazakhstan.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, of course, Soviet Moscow would steadily gain more power over the jurisdictions of Orenburg, the first capital of the Kazakh Republic, and any other national capital as time progressed.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the national basis for the border beyond the Ural River was new and important.

Though both Bukey and Astrakhan provinces were officially within the boundaries of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Bukey Province was part of the Kazakh national republic as well. In contrast, territorial membership of the RSFSR alone did not designate a province as Russian. Unlike Kazakhs and many other nations in the USSR, Russians were officially denied their own titular republic with its attendant Russian institutional framework. This is connected again with nationalism and fears of "Great Russian chauvinism."⁷⁷ Thus, Astrakhan Province had no formally national definition. Nevertheless, with its significant Russian population Astrakhan might have been described at the time as *de facto* Russian. The disputes to come between Astrakhan and Urda were not only administrative but also national in character, thanks to each province's affiliation, one official and one *de facto*, with a different national identity. These affiliations were magnified by the Bolsheviks' nationalities policies, and would reinforce profoundly political and deeply contentious aspects of administrative jurisdiction.

By 1921, then, when a dispute over land use between Bukey and Astrakhan arose, the local organs of power lobbying Narkomzem RSFSR had been remade by the Revolution, though the fundamental differences between sedentary and nomadic practices in the area had largely survived 1917, as had the tensions arising from those differences. After a preliminary appraisal and a consultation with the Administrative Committee of the All-Union Central Executive Committee (VTsIK, also based in Moscow) the presidium of the

⁷⁵As is evident from correspondence of the time, including this communiqué sent from the Kazakh central government in 1921, letters addressed to the Bukey Provincial Executive Committee were sent to Urda (GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 86).

⁷⁶Orenburg would remain the capital of the Kazakh Republic until 1925, when the city was transferred to the RSFSR. The Kazakh capital was moved to Kyzylorda (formerly Perovsk) until 1929 when it was transferred to Alma-Ata (Almaty) (Ryspaev, *Istoriia Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 422).

⁷⁷Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 15–16; Terry Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism," in *State of Nations*, 80; Terry Martin, "Borders and Ethnic Conflict: The Soviet Experiment in Ethno Territorial Proliferation," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47 (1999): 538–55. Note that from 1926 Russian national soviets were permitted. This created more opportunities for the formal recognition of Russian identity (Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 39).



Federal Committee of Narkomzem RSFSR produced a declaration.⁷⁸ Present at the presidium were two representatives of the Kazakh Commissariat for Agriculture (Narkomzem KSSR) and one member of the Astrakhan Provincial Committee (Gubkom).⁷⁹ The presidium decided that both the land near Lake Baskunchak, and that near the Regular Nomadic Camp, should be considered part of the Kazakh Republic. Further, all those Russians living continuously within either area retained their rights to land use, but now on the basis of Kazakh law and under governance from Urda. Russians not permanently resident in either area but using land therein were offered a choice: take up occupancy within the Kazakh Republic and live by its rules, or move to Astrakhan Province and lose all rights to use Kazakh land. Appeals would be heard until March 1, 1922, and all Russian farmsteads newly deemed illegal had to be dismantled by March 1, 1923.⁸⁰ The presidium's ruling is further evidence of the decolonising potential of nationalist thinking in the 1920s, manifested not only in Kazakh territory but all across the Soviet space.⁸¹ Its intended benefit for Kazakhs is clear, but there is also an implied benefit for the predominantly nomadic citizens who migrated north of the Caspian Sea. The forced emigration of sedentary Russians would leave vacant contested pastureland and other resources essential to the lives of local nomads.

The eventual reversal of this arrangement would be facilitated by nomadism. Appeals against Moscow's decision were made long before March 1922. Astrakhan was informed of the commissariat's decision, and ordered to fulfil the requirements of the protocol, on October 18, 1921.⁸² The next day the Astrakhan Gubkom questioned the wisdom of those operating in Moscow, and supplemented its case with a report addressed to the Federal Committee of Narkomzem RSFSR.⁸³ The report made the concession, possibly tactical, that the fifty thousand desiatinas of the Regular Nomadic Encampment had been *de jure* owned by Kazakhs.⁸⁴ Ever since the Bukey influx in Tsarist times, however, land had been leased back to Russians haphazardly, and the Russians had plowed up more and more of the camp, increasing not only the annual harvest of crops but also their livestock.⁸⁵ Besides, it was argued, the Kazakhs did not even use the land—it had become Russian by custom.⁸⁶

In the letter accompanying the report, Astrakhan reminded Narkomzem RSFSR that the Russian population of both the Baskunchak tract and the Regular Nomadic Encampment

⁷⁸GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 84. For evidence of a dialogue between the Administrative Committee of VTsIK and Narkomzem RSFSR on this issue see GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 31, l. 3.

⁷⁹GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 30, l. 2. This document, dated October 19, 1921, informed members of Narkomzem RSFSR of the decision made by the presidium fifteen days previously.

⁸⁰For the relevant protocol from the meeting see GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, ll. 85–85ob.

⁸¹Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 88.

⁸²GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 31, l. 1. The Kazakh Commissariat of Agriculture was also informed around this time (*ibid.*, l. 2).

⁸³For the first communiqué from the Astrakhan Gubkom see *ibid.*, ll. 5–5ob. Its report was received the next day, October 21, 1921 (*ibid.*, ll. 6–6ob.).

⁸⁴According to the report, the Regular Nomadic Encampment was originally leased to the Kazakh population of the Bukey *Juz*, but was subsequently given to them freely (*ibid.*, l. 6).

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, l. 6ob. The Astrakhan Gubkom also argued in its letter to Moscow that the Russian population's stocks of cattle and crops exceeded those of the Kazakhs in the Regular Nomadic Encampment (*ibid.*, l. 5). For an account of this process in late-Soviet scholarship see S. B. Baishev, *Ocherki ekonomicheskoi istorii Kazakhskoi SSR (1860–1970 gg.)* (Alma-Ata, 1974), 89.

⁸⁶GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 31, l. 6.



was larger than the local Kazakh population, and that further colonization by the Russians had been permitted and regulated by two territorial (krai) congresses of Soviets since the revolution.⁸⁷ Astrakhan was using its position as a largely Russian province to argue that it should govern areas where Russians were a majority. Urda, as part of the KSSR, was less appropriate for the task. The nationality of the populations in question was not the only relevant factor, however: Astrakhan further implied that productive Russian farmsteads were being put under threat by governing bodies in Urda, whose sympathies lay more with the rival interests of backward Kazakh nomads.⁸⁸ Astrakhan therefore admitted the presence and importance of nomads in the debate, but only in terms of the threat they posed to productive farmers. Nomadic interests were not a legitimate priority.

Some of Astrakhan's account was questionable. Studies conducted in 1920 found a population of 239,300 in Bukey Province and described no less than 99 percent of this number as Kazakh, the remaining 1 percent being Russian. In no other Kazakh-run province were Russians found to be such a minority.⁸⁹ These statistics should be treated with a high degree of scepticism given the paucity of available sources at the time and the limited resources enjoyed by administrators and scholars after the Civil War. Besides, as is clear from the dispute between Urda and Astrakhan itself, the official boundaries of what was considered Bukey Province would have been ambiguous in 1920 to anyone conducting a study. Nevertheless, Narkomzem RSFSR had seen reports on the preponderance of Kazakhs in Bukey Province by late 1922, and this can only have damaged the credibility of claims made by Astrakhan about the number of Russians on the borderlands.⁹⁰ Most probably, ambiguity arose from the lack of consensus on what constituted residence and land-ownership. Because much of the Kazakh population was regularly migrating and its habits were poorly understood by local Russians, Astrakhan was able to underestimate the number of Kazakhs and the extent of their land use, either through mistake or wilful misunderstanding. Other organs were free to exaggerate it.⁹¹

In the absence of consensus, the Kazakh authorities were well prepared for a response from the Astrakhan Gubkom. Around the time that Astrakhan made its disquiet known, the central government of the Kazakh Republic wrote to the Bukey Provincial Executive Committee.⁹² Central authorities proclaimed their explicit intention to protect the interests

⁸⁷Ibid., II. 5–5ob. It should be noted that the Russians encroaching upon Kazakh land would not necessarily have come from Astrakhan or its surrounding area. Prerevolutionary Russian immigrants came from all across the Russian Empire (Demko, *Russian Colonization of Kazakhstan*, 65).

⁸⁸Astrakhan may also have had in mind the region's status as a relative stronghold of Kazakh nationalism during the Civil War. See Uyama Tomohiko, "Two Attempts at Building a Qazaq State: The Revolt of 1916 and the Alash Movement," in *Islam and Politics in Russia and Central Asia (Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. Saphane A. Dudoignon and Komatsu Hisao (London, 2001), 88, 96–97.

⁸⁹GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 25, l. 144.

⁹⁰Ibid., II. 143, 144–46.

⁹¹The claims of the data collected in 1920 look similarly untrustworthy next to George J. Demko's series of maps documenting demographic change in prerevolutionary Kazakhstan. According to his study from 1969, Kazakhs were barely an absolute majority in northwestern Kazakhstan the year before the revolution, though the Tsarist source material being cited here is also likely to have underestimated nomadic numbers (*Russian Colonization of Kazakhstan*, 133–36).

⁹²To be precise, a communiqué was dispatched on October 13, 1921, less than a less before Astrakhan's response to the ruling (GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 86).



of the Bukey Provincial Committee in Urda and requested further information from the province so that its various territorial disputes could be resolved with Moscow. The direct involvement of republic-level officials again implied that the dispute was national rather than administrative or agricultural in character, since a matter of bureaucratic expediency and land management may have been more astutely resolved by officials in Astrakhan and Urda, both more directly involved than anyone in Orenburg.

Faced with the involvement of the central Kazakh authorities, Astrakhan's resistance continued after Narkomzem RSFSR's original deadline for complaints had passed. Twice in 1923, on April 23 and August 24, Narkomzem RSFSR issued declarations stating that it saw no credible reason to reverse the original decision it had made in October 1921.⁹³ Repeatedly over this two-year period, the authorities in Moscow endorsed the principle that the Bukey Kazakhs should be managed by Kazakh organs of state. While simultaneously appealing against Moscow's ruling, Astrakhan made efforts to demonstrate compliance. In 1922 the province's Eleventh Congress of Soviets conceded that the unsystematic settlement of nomadic territory had led to chaos, and that Russians had encroached on swathes of land far larger than had originally been intended.⁹⁴ These claims, though accurate, bear some resemblance to the rhetoric of many in the Kazakh branch of the Communist party at this time, and may have been a symbolic accommodation of the prevailing anticolonial paradigm which was so closely associated with the governance of nationalities in the early 1920s.⁹⁵

However, Astrakhan's conciliatory sentiments belied the hardship experienced by those actually living on the borderline between provinces because the encroachment and unregulated settlement of land by Russians was continuing apace. In April 1923, the year after Astrakhan's rhetorical concessions, Narkomzem RSFSR demanded an explanation from the Astrakhan Gubkom for its continuing "onslaught" on the Kazakh Republic.⁹⁶ Though Orenburg was granted control over the former Bukey Khanate, Russians from neighbouring Astrakhan were continuing to colonize and settle the land there, perpetuating the serious disruption of nomadic migratory habits in the area. Back in Moscow, notable figures such as Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev acknowledged the plight of the Bukey Kazakhs and held meetings to discuss it with party colleagues involved in agricultural policy.⁹⁷ Nomadism was complicating the western border of the Kazakh Republic, but not only because nomads came and went. It also affected the behavior of sedentary communities. In contrast with widespread perceptions of nomads as disruptive, aimless wanderers, it was sedentary Russians rather than nomadic Kazakhs who were more likely to ignore the border and colonize the land of a neighboring republic, acting on the pretence of their administrators in Astrakhan that nomadic land was vacant land. Similar processes appear to have been ongoing at other points around the Kazakh Republic, and not only along its northern border.⁹⁸

⁹³GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 30, ll. 19, 21.

⁹⁴Ibid., l. 1.

⁹⁵See, for example, APRK, f. 139, op. 1, d. 2, l. 79.

⁹⁶GARF, f. 3260, op. 1, d. 30, l. 19.

⁹⁷Ibid., l. 15.

⁹⁸L. C. Gatagova, L. P. Kosheleva, and L. A. Pogovaia, *TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, bk. 1, 1918–1933 gg., *Dokumenty sovetskoi istorii* (Moscow, 2005), 406.



How was this being allowed to happen? The implication made by the Astrakhan Gubkom in 1921 was that government from Urda would favor the nomadic minority in the Baskunchak tract and the Regular Nomadic Encampment, placing productive Russian farmsteads under threat at a time of extensive food shortages. Ignoring this warning, Narkomzem RSFSR had granted Urda control over the disputed areas, specifically declaring that Russian farmers would henceforth live by Kazakh laws. The stage did indeed seem set for the invasion of cultivated arable farmland by nomadic herds. Yet a year and a half later the opposite was happening. To an extent this might be explained by the relative weakness and inability of the state, at this early stage after the Civil War, to halt processes which had been underway before 1917. But a further reason is that both sides so assiduously fought this territorial dispute in national terms. Orenburg stated its commitment to “the defense of the interests of the Bukey,” and therefore to the competencies of Urda as a center of the Kazakh Republic’s power, but not to the nomads nearby.⁹⁹ Narkomzem RSFSR was adjudicating at a time of official sensitivity to the dangers of Great Russian chauvinism, and its rejection of Astrakhan’s arguments should be understood in this context.¹⁰⁰ Nomadism may have caused the debate in the first place, as it complicated land-ownership in Bukey Province and made it difficult to draw a clearly recognizable border. But the dispute was resolved by bodies speaking for Russians and Kazakhs, not farmers and nomads, and the extension of nomadic practice was subsequently raised mainly by administrators in Astrakhan scare-mongering about the intentions of those in Urda.

The formal extension of the Kazakh Republic’s borders to encompass nomadic lands in the far west might at first seem like an early sign that nomadic life would be respected under Communism. In fact, it was a sign that Kazakh national, territorial identity was gaining formal recognition, replacing the old Tsarist principles of topographical and administrative expediency. This meant Kazakh bodies were likely to govern lands in which Kazakhs predominated, irrespective of whether those Kazakhs were nomadic or how well those nomads would be treated. Indeed, even as the Kazakh national border was firmly set in place to the west of the Ural River, the agricultural borders of sedentary farming extended eastward. The defence of national jurisdiction was taking priority over the defence of nomadism here and elsewhere along the Caspian, such as around the Garabogazköl Lagoon.

AROUND THE GARABOGAZKÖL LAGOON

In mid-July 1922 a report was produced by the Executive Committee of the Krasnovodsk Uezd, an administrative division containing many Turkmen in what was then the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). The report declared that since the beginning of that year Kazakhs from the bordering Adai Uezd had stolen 350 camels and 1,000 rams from Turkmen communities. Four Turkmen had been killed by Kazakhs. In response, six Kazakh women had been abducted and a number of cattle stolen. Though four of the

⁹⁹GARF, f. 1318, op. 11, d. 32, l. 86.

¹⁰⁰Slezkine, “USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 416–19.



women were subsequently returned, two remained kidnapped, and the Krasnovodsk Committee described how the Turkmen were preparing for a counterattack.¹⁰¹

New Soviet committees were already familiar with such behavior. Since spring 1921 local authorities had been encouraging Kazakhs to return livestock to Turkmen tribes in exactly the quantities that were stolen since before 1919. Murder, raids, and attacks were all described and condemned.¹⁰² The Adai region was itself notorious.¹⁰³ The Adai were originally a tribal grouping within the Kazakhs' Younger *Juz* which rebelled against Tsarist authorities in 1870. Violent protests split the Kazakh elites in the area, some of whom sided with the Russian administration and were rewarded, while others continued to resist taxation and the confiscation of pasturelands and were brutally repressed.¹⁰⁴ The tradition of violently resisting authority carried over into the Soviet era.¹⁰⁵ Briefly part of the Turkestan Republic, Adai Uezd joined the KSSR in October 1920. Though it remained an uezd, it was given the formal, more substantive powers of an oblast, a second type of administrative region. It was also enlarged to encompass two nomadic districts of Krasnovodsk Uezd to the south.¹⁰⁶

Krasnovodsk Uezd was then part of the Turkestan Republic but would join the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924. Both before and after this point, administrative bodies based in Krasnovodsk itself (now Türkmenbaşy) felt able to speak on behalf of local communities who would be assimilated into the single Turkmen nation.¹⁰⁷ In post-Soviet historiography the Turkmen tribes are sometimes distinguished from the other titular nationalities of Soviet Central Asia by their particular interpretation of Islam.¹⁰⁸ As with Kazakh tribal confederations, however, genealogy and kinship were vitally important to Turkmen allegiances.¹⁰⁹ The "extraordinary ethnic complexity" of Central Asia applied as much to Turkmen as to Kazakhs, and it would be inappropriate to suggest that the disorder along the shores of the Caspian Sea was the product of clashes between just two distinct national groups.¹¹⁰ This is the suggestion made by many of the Soviet sources, though there is evidence that a more nuanced position could be found within the Soviet administration as well as outside it.

Alibi Dzhangil'din was a major figure in Kazakh politics in the early 1920s who visited the Adai and Turkmen borderlands in 1922–23.¹¹¹ He reported that the population of the Adai Uezd, whom he called *adaevtsy*, migrated perpetually throughout the year. This

¹⁰¹GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, l. 89. An uezd was a small administrative division predating 1917.

¹⁰²Ibid., l. 20.

¹⁰³Adai nomads migrated even during the winter, and the hardship they suffered in the 1920s was particularly acute (Kindler, *Stalins Nomaden*, 67; Omarov, *Rasstrelianaia step'*, 8).

¹⁰⁴Kassymova et al., *Historical Dictionary*, 18.

¹⁰⁵Omarov, *Rasstrelianaia step'*, 14.

¹⁰⁶Aldazhumanov et al., *Istoriia Kazakhstana*, 196. "District" here is a translation of the Russian *volost'*.

¹⁰⁷Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 84.

¹⁰⁸Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire; A Guide*, First ed. (London, 1985), 101; Shirin Akiner, *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union* (London, 1986), 313–27.

¹⁰⁹Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 8; idem, "Genealogy, Class, and "Tribal Policy" in Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–1934," *Slavic Review* 60 (Summer 2001): 266–88.

¹¹⁰Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 18; Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, 121.

¹¹¹For further information on Dzhangil'din's background in the region see Omarov, *Rasstrelianaia step'*, 10.



migration took them annually over the Kazakh-Turkestan border and into land used by Turkmen. Though he considered them loyal to Soviet power, Dzhangil'din placed heavy emphasis on the primitive life of the *adaevtsy*, presenting them as helpless in the face of bad weather and a hostile natural environment.¹¹² *Adaevtsy* were also used as examples of the most destitute of the republic's population by foremost party members.¹¹³

It is itself notable that some reports contain no references to Kazakhs at all, preferring instead a derivation of the Adai title. It shows that in January 1923, when Dzhangil'din's report was written, an astute observer understood that the loyalties dividing the people of the Ustyurt Plateau were more those of kinship than nationhood. As well as weather and environmental conditions, the *adaevtsy* were also said to be at the mercy of raids from the Iomud, a tribal grouping that soon would be incorporated into the Turkmen nation.¹¹⁴ There is clear evidence that, when the Adai Uezd expanded southward and claimed land formerly governed by Krasnovodsk, resident Iomuds showed little appreciation for this administrative reorganization. Some new Adai committees in the area had struggled to prevent fellow Adai from attacking the Iomud, but had also called upon the Krasnovodsk authorities to resist any temptation to interfere. It had become Kazakh land. Adai authorities instead recommended the creation of a governing assembly representing both peoples.¹¹⁵

This is one half of the story. While on his excursion from Fort Aleksandrovsk during the Russian Civil War, Dzhangil'din had received help from local inhabitants organized by Tobaniiaz Alniiiazov.¹¹⁶ For his prominence and respect among the Adai, Alniiiazov was named chairman of the Adai Uezd Revolutionary Committee by Dzhangil'din. Alniiiazov became as much part of the inchoate Soviet apparatus as any other local elite, but, typically, his "attitude toward Soviet power was not simple."¹¹⁷ Like Dzhangil'din, Alniiiazov was sensitive to the social and political structures of the Adai. He modeled himself as the "Khan of the Adaevtsy." In 1922, acting on the violence between local peoples, Alniiiazov assembled a military brigade and led a raid over the Kazakh border.¹¹⁸ Alniiiazov thereby ignored the sanctity of the boundary with Turkestan. This was not quite in keeping with the objectives of cross-border cooperation formally endorsed by the Communist party, and it broadcasted that institution's limited power around the Caspian Sea.

The Alniiiazov example makes it all the more striking that other local organs had clung to the view, or maintained the pretence, that the paraphernalia of nationhood would fix ongoing tribal tensions. Nearby nomadic communities also traversed the Kazakh border with Turkestan, including where it sat close to the Garabogazköl Lagoon. Whereas Alniiiazov may at least have understood the symbolic significance of crossing the border with arms the nomads might have been only faintly aware of their transgression. Yet many Soviet

¹¹²Grigorii Fedorovich Dakshleiger and M. Abilova, *Sotsial'isticheskoe stroitel'stvo v Kazakhstane v vosstanovitel'yi period, 1921–1925 gg: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Alma-Ata, 1962), 89–91.

¹¹³APRK, f. 139, op. 1, d. 541, l. 118.

¹¹⁴Dakshleiger and Abilova, *Sotsial'isticheskoe stroitel'stvo v Kazakhstane*, 88, 91.

¹¹⁵GARE, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, l. 20.

¹¹⁶Fort-Aleksandrov is now Fort-Shevchenko. For Dzhangil'din's own account of this period see Chingiz Dzhangil'din, ed., *Alibi Dzhangil'din: Dokumenty i materialy* (Almaty, 2009), 74–76.

¹¹⁷Aldazhumanov et al., *Istoriia Kazakhstana*, 304.

¹¹⁸Omarov, *Rasstrelianaia step'*, 12. Alniiiazov would eventually be arrested in November 1928 (Aldazhumanov et al., *Istoriia Kazakhstana*, 304–5).



administrators took the border seriously. It became both cause and symptom of the Communist party's insistence that violence between nomads should be understood in national terms. That this was so is immediately clear from the measures taken by the state to bring order to the Ustyurt Plateau.

On April 6, 1921, before Alniiazov's raid, the Krasnovodsk Uezd-City Executive Committee decided to convene a "Kazakh-Iomud" Conference in Krasnovodsk. It was one of the Soviet era's first major attempts at resolving inter-tribal conflict in nomadic regions, setting as its agenda the establishment of borders between Turkmen and Kazakh migrations, and the liquidation of the Kazakh-Iomud conflict. The conferees felt unable to resolve the first matter. Kazakhs of the two districts which had recently left the jurisdiction of Krasnovodsk and joined Adai Uezd complained that their water sources and pasturage were over the border to the south, so they had to enter Turkestan to survive. Attendees decided to allow the Kazakh and Turkestan governments to solve this problem, and as a temporary solution they sought to dissuade Kazakhs from migrating too close to areas where conflict with Iomud was more likely. Around the Garabogazköl Lagoon, in particular, Kazakh nomads were advised to migrate along a specific route. Turning to the second item on their agenda, conference members demanded an immediate cessation of all hostilities. A second Kazakh-Iomud Conference was scheduled for July 1, 1921, which would discuss conflicts in areas which had not dispatched a delegate to Krasnovodsk.¹¹⁹

Hostilities, it is evident, did not cease for several years. The idea of convening a conference to resolve long-standing tribal antipathies is itself interesting. It perhaps speaks of the early self-confidence of Soviet administrators who believed that a talking shop could mitigate a fierce battle for the limited resources east of the Caspian. But the occurrence and subsequent failure of these staged events are easily connected to other, more specific trends in the relationship between Soviet state and Kazakh nomad.

First, easy assumptions about the inherent disorder of nomadic society must be avoided, but abduction and raids were not new phenomena among these communities. Kazakh concepts such as cattle-rustling (*barymta*) and blood fueds (*qun*) suggest that nomads saw such practices as more a part of everyday life, and less a crisis of lawlessness, than Soviet administrators were prepared to accept.¹²⁰ When the new authorities accused the Adai Kazakhs of *stealing* cattle—an act regarded as an infraction—they followed in the footsteps of Tsarist officials who had so misunderstood nomadic customs.¹²¹ This might be associated with what Edward Schatz calls "criminalizing clans," the Soviet intrusion into traditional forms of authority in Kazakh society.¹²² In other words, already in 1921 the Soviet state was predisposed to sweep away some habits of nomadic life.¹²³

¹¹⁹GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, ll. 4–4ob.

¹²⁰Khazanov, *Nomads*, 150; Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics*, 43; Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 24.

¹²¹Though by this time, as Virginia Martin argues, the custom in question had been changed by the forces of Tsarist colonialism. See her "Barımta: Nomadic Custom, Imperial Crime," in *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917*, ed. Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (Bloomington, 1997), 250.

¹²²Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics*, 43–45.

¹²³The intention here is not to contrast the Soviet Union with the Tsarist Empire. In certain regards the two polities had identical effects on nomadic life. See, for example, Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, 198.



Second, the Krasnovodsk conference spoke of a Kazakh-Iomud conflict, but also of a Kazakh-Turkmen border. A key source of the former, it was believed, was disrespect for the latter, as it was best to keep warring tribes apart. Immediately this necessitated the intervention of central authorities, and focus shot from the fundamentals of nomadic existence to the high politics of national jurisdiction. Like the plight of nomads in Bukey Province, the idiosyncrasies of nomadic life and death on the Ustyurt Plateau were again subsumed into a nation-based understanding of Central Asia. Even a peace agreement signed on August 8, 1921, bore the names of representatives from the Kazakh and the “Turkmen-Iomud” people, both quasi-national rather than tribal affiliations, in the fashion of a diplomatic accord.¹²⁴ Similar efforts were made to establish peace between Turkmen and Uzbeks around Khiva.¹²⁵

Borders negotiated between nations created new problems for migrating nomads, whether Kazakh or Turkmen-Iomud. In the 1920s the Mangışhlak was one of the few places where nomads continued to migrate perpetually throughout the year, and any new boundary would separate people from resources which they had long used, but over which no legal ownership was agreed. The RSFSR’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs had to try to supervise the expulsion of communities who found themselves on the wrong side of the divide.¹²⁶ Further east along the border between Turkestan and the KSSR, it was reported in 1922 that nomads were continuing to travel south to trade, as they had done for generations. Typically, Kazakhs would exchange their cattle for bread and other farming produce. On their return journeys, militia men at the border would find the nomads’ bread supplies and accuse them of speculation. The food would be requisitioned (sometimes for the border guards’ own consumption), and occasionally nomads were arrested.¹²⁷

The negotiations over borders between Turkmen and Kazakh territories bore more than a passing resemblance to those underway further north between Astrakhan and Urda. Like the Astrakhan Provincial Committee, the Krasnovodsk Uezd-City Executive Committee was then part of a Soviet polity which did not engender one specific national identity; the Turkestan ASSR, meantime, was similar to the RSFSR in that it was conceived without a dominant titular nationality. Yet negotiators on both sides defended the rights of disparate nomadic tribes by using the language of national territorial integrity. If this was done to protect those leading a nomadic lifestyle, the resolution of disagreements and the imposition of borders did not ease the difficulties experienced by nomads, and at times they exacerbated them. As in Bukey Province, nomads on the periphery of Kazakh territory were at the epicenter of a power struggle over resources and control, and though there was ambivalence in the party’s attitude toward nomads, this ambivalence was not one of the Kazakhs’ national traits. Local Kazakh authorities often demonstrated limited understanding of tribal conflicts and limited apparent empathy for nomadic communities.¹²⁸ The simple extension of Kazakh

¹²⁴GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, l. 108.

¹²⁵Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, 2006), 62.

¹²⁶GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, ll. 62, 84.

¹²⁷APRK, f. 139, op. 1, d. 254, l. 98.

¹²⁸The Communist party’s policy of *korenizatsiia* was intended to recruit members of national minorities to govern in each respective minority’s national territory. Cherot has looked at this process specifically in the



jurisdiction therefore guaranteed no favors. Indeed, the national paradigm was even less suitable for understanding the processes at work in the Adai tribal lands than it was for understanding the colonization of land near Lake Baskunchak. Russian and Kazakh identities were at least made clearer through the juxtaposition of their agricultural practices. Around the Garabogazköl Lagoon authorities were still dividing up tribes into Turkmen and Kazakh even as they were drawing a line between peoples who disagreed about much but were equally inconvenienced by territorial boundaries.

A second Kazakh-Iomud conference took place in Krasnovodsk on July 25, 1922, but it was hardly constructive. Turkmen representatives complained about the small number of Kazakhs in attendance and speculated that perhaps the Kazakhs simply had no desire to establish peaceful relations. No Kazakh delegates from any Adai institution attended, and the conferees who did attend decided that those Kazakhs who had made the journey were from families already migrating within Krasnovodsk territory. They were unable to negotiate alone without the authority of the Adai Uezd, the government of which had previously given its full support for the meeting of the conference. It was further declared that nothing more could be achieved that day without members of Adai Uezd itself, and again that higher republic-wide authorities should involve themselves in the dispute.¹²⁹

Higher organs of power were indeed in contention over territory at this time, again reinforcing the perception that this was a matter of republic-wide and therefore national importance. The extension of the Adai Uezd southward to include the Garabogazköl Lagoon was strongly resisted by the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan Republic. One committee member, Nikolai Iomudskii, claimed to have taken part in an expedition to the coastline and to have been well informed on local circumstances there. Given that Iomudskii was a member of one of the Iomud's leading families, his experience might have been assumed. In any case, he suggested that the prevalence of wells and pastures around the lagoon would force Turkmen into Kazakh land, and that this would exacerbate tensions. Though he supported the principle of a border, his stated aim was a border which reflected the social realities of the area.¹³⁰

Iomudskii, as a Iomud and member of the Turkestan Central Executive Committee, is likely to have espoused a particular conception of those social realities. Whereas Adai committees chose to emphasize the number of armed Iomuds on Kazakh land, reports originating from Krasnovodsk and its higher authorities tended to present the Kazakhs as perpetrators of violence.¹³¹ Already, their vested interests were pitting different national committees against one another, meaning that border disputes were associated with national

Kazakh case. He notes that the recruitment of Kazakhs was pursued with some success by the mid-1920s, but that the "unsettled character" of the nomadic Kazakhs made the process more difficult ("Nativization of Government and Party Structure in Kazakhstan," 53, 57–58). The result of this was that those Kazakhs who were recruited did not have an immediate cultural connection with their nomadic compatriots, meaning that a Kazakh seems to have been barely more likely to empathise with nomadic hardship than a party member from a European national background. See also Tomohiko, "Geography of Civilizations," 83, 87; and Matthew J. Payne, "The Forge of the Kazakh Proletariat? The Turksib, Nativization, and Industrialization during Stalin's first Five-Year Plan," in *State of Nations*, 236–52.

¹²⁹GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 751, l. 79.

¹³⁰Ibid., l. 62.

¹³¹Ibid., l. 20.



prestige and status rather than local questions of agricultural practice. Thus, the option of abolishing the border altogether, or making it legally porous, was not considered, since that would only complicate jurisdiction; instead, the argument focused on the placement of the border. Regardless, Iomudskii did not get his way. In 1924 the Turkmen Republic was formed out of western Turkestan. Authorities were clearly cognizant of the heterogeneity of some new borderland areas, but no extension of Turkmen jurisdiction into Adai Uezd was recorded at this time by the Central Asian Bureau.¹³²

It is difficult to say whether a border better placed, or a border less stringently observed, could have encouraged greater prosperity in the area, but the economy of Adai Uezd remained one of the weakest in the Kazakh Republic for the rest of the decade. By April 10, 1929, it had been made into an okrug, a new Soviet economic region, and the Kazakh Central Executive Committee (KTsIK) and the Kazakh Soviet of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom KASSR) presented VTsIK with a joint declaration "On the Liquidation of Adai Okrug of Kazakhstan." In the two years since the process of *raionirovanie* turned Adai Uezd into an okrug, the declaration claimed, the region had consistently underperformed economically.¹³³ With only 177,000 registered residents, despite its considerable size, Adai Okrug contained a disproportionately small amount of the republic's population. Sixty-seven percent of its budget came from subsidies, and its entire budget (1,021,000 rubles for 1928–29) was the equivalent of only 1.4 percent of the republic's overall budget. The principal economic activity of the okrug was still nomadic animal husbandry. Only 2 percent of the population was described as sedentary; 23 percent were semi-nomadic; 28 percent were nomadic with a migratory radius of up to 300 versts and 47 percent were nomadic with a migratory radius of 1,000 versts or more. These nomadic communities reportedly remained impoverished and highly unstable. The trope of the wandering nomad at the mercy of the elements was as clear in this declaration as it was in Dzhangil'din's 1923 report. The joint declaration further admitted that half of the region was always outside of the state's control, wherever its administrative center was located, because of the infrastructural inadequacies of the okrug.¹³⁴ In this respect, Adai Okrug had barely developed since the end of the Civil War.

Back in 1922 the Kazakh and Turkmen communities of this region had shared a nomadic lifestyle. As even top agents of the Russian Communist Party became aware, a common preference for nomadism did nothing to ameliorate the often fierce rivalry between groups of Central Asians, but it did mean that such conflict differed in some respects from that witnessed in the northwest of the republic.¹³⁵ The two agricultural communities competing over the outermost reaches of Bukey Province seemed loath to coexist in the same space. The matter was simpler still because agricultural practice appeared to correlate more neatly with nationality. Disagreements arose over where to draw the line between nomadism and farming, Kazakhs and Cossacks, and in the deliberations on this question we see prevailing attitudes toward nomads emerge. In contrast, Turkmen and Kazakh nomads crossed paths repeatedly around the Garabogazköl Lagoon and on the Mangışlak Peninsula. This, along

¹³²RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 108, ll. 92, 61, 60.

¹³³GARE, f. 1235, op. 123, d. 345, l. 56. For more on *raionirovanie* see Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 34.

¹³⁴GARE, f. 1235, op. 123, d. 345, ll. 56–56ob.

¹³⁵Gatagova et al., *TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 242–46.



with their historical enmity, made the establishment of two national jurisdictions considerably more difficult. But the party's use of national identity as a diagnostic tool to identify social ills had comparable effects in both cases.

Like disputes taking place north of the Caspian, disagreements between Kazakh and Turkmen organs around the Garabogazköl were shaped by the emerging national administrative structures which absorbed tribal antipathies and sought to resolve them. It might first be assumed that these new structures would have benefited nomadic populations. As with those in Urda, the notion of Kazakh national jurisdiction prompted Adai Uezd authorities to defend the interests of their residents even when they wandered beyond the borders of their republic. Yet the interests of the nation in fact acted as a doppelgänger to the interests of the nomad; they looked alike but were quite different, and the prioritization of national interests was a bad omen for nomadic communities. In the long term, from the later economic underperformance of the Adai region and the continuing expansion of arable farming east of Astrakhan, it is clear that the assertion and retention of Kazakh jurisdiction around the Caspian Sea did little to support local nomads.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Nomadism and border-making literally and theoretically intersected as frequently as might be expected. It is too simplistic to say that nomadism was incompatible with the division of land, but whereas a settled community might have a new dividing line imposed just meters from its outermost suburbs without trouble, a nomadic or transhumant community was likely to find that such a line deprived its people of essential resources. Similarly, it would be misleading to claim that nomads had no traditional understanding of land ownership or land rights, but it is true that their sense of ownership was more flexible and adaptable than might have been allowed by the categorical certainties of national delimitation.¹³⁶

More significantly, Soviet border-making was a feature of the predilection for categorizing Central Asian peoples by national identity. This was novel not only for some of the peoples being categorized, but also for the region, since, as Adrienne Lynne Edgar has noted, "it is hard to imagine a less congenial setting for the late-nineteenth century European doctrine of nationalism."¹³⁷ It distracted party members from other systems of categorization which were arguably more indicative of local social realities, and which surely were more congruent with the world view of their leaders. Although the party based its political ideology on a materialist philosophy, it identified citizens by their economic function; and although the party claimed legitimacy from its association with a particular class, it disregarded the nomadic-sedentary division between peoples around the Caspian Sea—surely as material and economic a cleavage as it is possible to find—and strained to accommodate their national divisions instead. Any commonly understood notion of a specific nomadic "class" in Communist party discourse is notable by its absence, perhaps because

¹³⁶Schatz, for example, suggests that "the Kazakh nomadic pastoralists had a loose, but still notable, attachment to territory" (*Modern Clan Politics*, 29).

¹³⁷Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 19.



the Kazakh Steppe already seemed replete with problematic but exploitable social cleavages of a national character.¹³⁸

In time, the significance of nomadism and nationality became more balanced and interconnected. In early 1928 central organs in Moscow were asked to resolve a territorial dispute between the Kazakh region of Semipalatinsk and neighboring Siberian authorities, then part of the RSFSR. Semipalatinsk argued that the population of a nearby Siberian district was almost entirely Kazakh, and should therefore join the Kazakh Republic. After an extended dispute, the district in question remained outside of Kazakh jurisdiction. In justifying its decision, Moscow pointed out that the large Kazakh population of the district was agricultural and sedentary, and therefore better managed by the nearest Siberian town where Russians predominated. This reasoning prioritized the nomadic-sedentary divide, and its proper management, above the Russian-Kazakh divide.¹³⁹ The story of other disputes in the later 1920s, such as those between Kazakh and Uzbek authorities, also reflects this tendency to review the ethnic, administrative, and also economic or agricultural feasibility of any new border.¹⁴⁰ It may be explained by the increasing salience of nomadism as a problem of governance for local administrators preparing to implement collectivization, and a growing frustration with nomads who were not settling by their own volition despite the supposed modernising impetus of nationalism and socialism.

The Caspian disputes of the early 1920s show a different relationship between nationality and nomadism in Soviet Central Asia. For the former, it uncovers a deficiency in the Bolsheviks' initial approach to nationalities. This is measured not by the extent of its success in constructing or accurately representing cultures. Instead, it is visible in the way the accommodation of nationalism frustrated the governance of nomadism, a social phenomenon which did not sit easily within new national boundaries, geographical or theoretical. A notionally emancipatory doctrine for formerly colonized non-European peoples actually expedited the ongoing decline of a Central Asian agricultural practice. This is easily overlooked in historical studies of nation-making precisely because nomadism was overlooked during the creation of national boundaries. On the matter of nomadism itself, the significance of the party's nationalities policies should not be underestimated. It contributed to the maladministration of nomads which may eventually have led frustrated party officials to take drastic measures. We also begin to understand, on the other hand, what dictated relations between state and nomad *before* collectivization and sedentarization turned that relationship into a process of mass violence.

The Bolsheviks and the regional elites with whom they cooperated considered nomadism to be among the most backward lifestyles to be found in the former Tsarist empire. This was apparently manifested in the nomads' culture and also in their lamentable productive capacity. But Soviet power's dismissal of nomads was so complete that their

¹³⁸As they were excluded from the typology of nationhood, so nomads were also not recognized in the party's other, more explicitly economic system of social categorization. There was no widespread conception of a nomadic class. Such a thing was surely conceivable if the "anomalous" class of priests was permissible. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia," in *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings*, ed. Martin A. Miller (Oxford, 2001), 215.

¹³⁹Thomas, "Kazakh Nomads and the New Soviet State," 116–21.

¹⁴⁰Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 172.



practices were not built properly into either of the Communist party's two most salient systems of categorization: class and nationhood. Nationhood was perceived as a modern remedy for pre-modern nomadic norms, but it was just as likely in the early years to distract administrators from alternative remedies for nomadic hardship, perceived or real, or perhaps to prematurely stop the search for remedies altogether.

A little later on in the decade, on October 26, 1924, VTsIK would meet to discuss the next national territorial division of Central Asia. One attendee, Yannis Rudzutak, was chairman of the Central Asian Bureau and was thus considered an authority on the region among his colleagues in Moscow. Speaking of the various subgroups of Kazakh who populated the borderlands between modern day Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, he would complain that these groups' cultural differences caused conflict in spite of the fact that they were all nomadic cattle herders, and therefore led very similar lives. The cultural distinctions between these Central Asians, Rudzutak added, were politicizing simple budgetary deliberations over whether to subsidize settled communities.¹⁴¹

Rudzutak may have had a point, but it is ironic that he should make it at a meeting convened to discuss the ongoing national delimitation of Central Asia. He held nomads themselves to blame for the political conflict which distracted administrators from the more fundamental economic questions of who was nomadic, who was sedentary, and who was in need of assistance. But the new Soviet state had been guilty of this misdirection, as Rudzutak would have it, from its very inception.

¹⁴¹Gatagova et al., *TSK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros*, 244–45.